

From GEDS to PhDs



LIFETIME

Low-Income Families'
Empowerment through Education

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To: Congressman Jim McDermott, House of Representatives Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support

Re: Hearing on the Role of Education in the TANF Program

In fall of 2005 I was accepted to Mills College in Oakland, California. I came into Mills with a 3.88 GPA. While my initial reaction was one of great joy and pride, I was also faced with the reality of having been on welfare, parenting two children and trying to remain eligible for benefits in Contra Costa County. I had been on an off of welfare for about 3 or 4 years total so I was well aware of the changes that were taking place in the system.

It always struck me as odd that when I came to my appointments, I was always told what I couldn't do as a work related activity. Had I not been required early on to jump through many of the hoops that welfare demanded, I would have long since been finished with my degree, and at least been able to compete for jobs that would ultimately see me never returning to the welfare. Instead, I have had to utilize food stamps, and I am now finishing my Masters degree at Mills with no support from the welfare system, a system which as a working adult, I paid into long before becoming one of its recipients.

I have been told that I am six months away from timing out of my welfare clock. While I understand the need for reforms, I fail to understand how women in my position can be denied opportunities to thrive and become self-sufficient members of society. My last experience with TANF was one of the most negative of my life. I was a part of the Contra Costa County system and I went to my worker after completing an approved program at Loma Vista Adult Center. I was given a list of acceptable programs, none of which had anything to do with what I had been studying in community college, or anything remotely close to what my life goals were. But out of respect for the rules, I attended faithfully the program I was mandated to choose.

When all of my cohorts were just looking for an intern or externship, I drove to Marin County and found a paid position that could count as my externship. In a matter of 3 months I went from rooming patients to a higher paying position scheduling the physician's appointments. After a month and a half of doing my second position, I was promoted to Supervising the Medical Records department. I made straight A's and had perfect attendance, and earned a certificate for Medical Assisting. In a matter of months, I had completed an MA program, gotten a job, been promoted twice and at my final promotion I was making \$43,000 per year as a salaried employee.

Now this was wonderful and should have set the course for a successful career. However, after the woman who promoted me was let go, I was also terminated. I wasn't due to job performance, but because I didn't have the credentials to run the department, and the new administrator wanted someone with a degree. So I returned to the welfare office to explain this to my worker, and her response was "what makes you think I am going to allow you to obtain a degree that will pay you more than what I make doing my job as a case worker?" That statement cut me to the core, because what she was saying is I am working hard to keep you ignorant, unsuccessful and continuously having to struggle.

We are the people who when a recession hits, if the educated are struggling, we are suffering. If the middle class are losing ground, we are falling deeper into poverty. Education is the one equalizer of people. The money that the government spends on vocational training is money that could go toward educated individuals so that they can be absolutely self-sufficient. There would have been no need for my clock to have been extended, had I been allowed to complete my education when I first came to welfare. I had no idea of the rules and laws and that I was being misinformed on purpose. Today I am two semesters away from a Masters Degree in Public Policy. Why not afford me the opportunity to complete my program, so that I can be a success story and an example of what welfare can and should produce? You as our elected officials must begin to think about how you approach welfare reform. It is an ever evolving system that needs to look at the needs of the women who make up its participants. We are not ignorant women without goals. We are women who want more for ourselves and our children and for our futures.

When I think of the number of times that I was cut off of aid for supposed violations, which I now find out were not violations, but someone's unwillingness to support my goals for their personal reasons, it frustrates me to say the least. At one point I was told I was not allowed to get student financial aid and benefits because I was being fraudulent. I reported every dime of my financial aid, only to later discover that as a rule TANF could not ding me for getting financial aid that was being used toward my education. So here I am today with no unemployment, no assistance, student debt and no job. I want to work, I want to be a productive citizen, and the most important thing is I followed the rules. You hold us accountable for every step we take while on TANF. Who holds your employee's and the elected officials accountable for their erroneous information, lack of empathy and blatant errors against us?

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